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ABSTRACT

Labor studies are often not included or underemphasized in the elementary and secondary school curricula. This ERIC Digest examines major themes of labor studies; inclusion of these themes in the curriculum; likely positive outcomes of labor studies in the curriculum; and available resources for teachers and students. Key historical events, the influence of immigration in the rise of unions, biographical studies of labor leaders, and labor legislation are major themes suggested for inclusion in elementary and secondary curricula. Labor studies can be incorporated in civics classes by discussing the right of citizens to join labor unions; in economics classes by the use of collective bargaining simulations; and in literature and creative writing classes by reading books with labor themes. Positive outcomes of including labor studies in the curriculum are a greater understanding of the contributions of workers, an appreciation of struggles that resulted as workers attempted to secure their rights, and increased knowledge of workers' rights. Sources of information about labor studies are suggested, and a 17-item bibliography of references and ERIC resources is included. (CT)

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LABOR STUDIES IN THE CURRICULUM

by Evelyn R. Holt

The field of labor studies is often overlooked or underemphasized in the curricula of elementary and secondary schools. Coverage tends to be spotty and disjointed, isolated information in a curriculum that stresses "more important" topics. Most students, however, will spend much of their lives as workers. They need to know the contributions of labor in the building of the nation and its economic system. Furthermore, examination of the history of labor in the United States helps students to understand current events. In this decade, for example, strikes at PATCO, Hormel in Minnesota, Anaconda in Arizona, and Eastern Airlines have made newspaper headlines. These events are understandable only as elements in the history of working people in the United States.

This ERIC Digest examines (1) major themes of labor studies, (2) inclusion of these themes in the curriculum, (3) likely positive outcomes of labor studies in the curriculum, and (4) available resources for teachers and students.

What Are the Major Themes of Labor Studies? In most United States history textbooks, labor unions and workers are treated superficially. Usually certain events are mentioned in the rise of organized labor (e.g., the Homestead, Pennsylvania strike of 1892 against Carnegie Steel; the Pullman Strike in Chicago in 1894; the Ludlow, Colorado massacre of strikers by militia in the Rockefeller-owned coal mines in 1914). These historical events can be expanded upon to include labor conditions that led to the rise of unions.

The influence of immigration in the rise of unions should be emphasized since many of the newly-arrived immigrants came from countries in Europe with a high-degree of craft guild involvement. Stories of the contributions to the labor movement of various immigrant groups can enrich and enliven the history curriculum.

Labor studies can also focus on the individual by studying labor leaders. Many teachers shy away from discussing controversial leaders, such as Eugene V. Debs, Jimmy Hoffa, "Mother" Jones, or John L. Lewis. In the context of our times, however, their proposals for such reforms as an eight-hour day, a secret ballot, or "a fair day's wage for a fair day's work" hardly seem radical.

Biographical studies of labor leaders provide fascinating insights into the causes for which they struggled. Frances Perkins, appointed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt as the first female Secretary of Labor, was a witness to the Triangle Shirtwaist Company fire in 1911 when 143 employees, mostly women, died. The fire motivated Perkins to take action to prevent unsafe working conditions; the safety codes she helped to enact after this tragedy still affect us.

Teachers should remember to provide a balanced treatment of labor leaders in American history. Students need to learn about the accomplishments and failures of these individuals and their leadership.

Labor studies involves labor legislation. Although students study the National Labor Relations Act of 1935 as organized labor's "Magna Carta," teachers usually underemphasize the meaning of collective bargaining. A useful strategy is to ask students what benefits they will expect in a future job: minimum wage, health insurance benefits, overtime pay, vacation, etc. Require students to investigate the sources of these expectations.

Pose these questions: When did Labor Day originate? Where? Why? We tend to take this holiday for granted. Students should learn its foundation in history, as well as the origins and justifications of this holiday.

How Can Labor Studies be Included in the Curriculum? As indicated by the preceding discussion, labor studies can be infused readily into the United States history course. However, it can fit easily into other standard courses of the social studies curriculum. For example, government and civics deal with the rights of citizens; one such right is to join collectively in bargaining in the workplace, if one so desires. The laws regarding the power of labor unions can also be examined. Landmark Supreme Court cases, such as MULLER V. OREGON (1908) or LOCHNER V. NEW YORK (1905), which dealt with working conditions and maximum hours legislation, respectively, provide precedents for judicial decision making that profoundly affect labor-management relations today.

In economics, labor is a component of the marketplace. Organized labor and labor studies can be infused naturally into this course. A collective bargaining simulation, for example, can make this topic a vital part of economics courses, as can speakers representing management and labor.

Literature and creative writing can also include topics in labor studies. THE FACTORY GIRL by Sarah Savage was the earliest American novel with a working person as a main character. Upton Sinclair's THE JUNGLE focuses upon the abuses of workers in the meat-packing industry in Chicago and the struggle of organized labor therein. Other literary works with labor-related themes include John Steinbeck's THE GRAPES OF WRATH and IN DUBIOUS BATTLE, SHIRLEY by Charlotte Bronte, MOLLY MCGUIRES by Anthony Bimba, BABBITT by Sinclair Lewis, and SISTER CARRIE by Theodore Dreiser. These novels can also be used to teach about historical events, whether it is the rise of the factory system in Lowell, Massachusetts, or the struggles of "Okies" during the Great Depression. Biographies also deal with

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labor studies and provide many opportunities for creative writing. Labor leaders, such as A. Philip Randolph, "Mother" Jones, John L. Lewis, Samuel Gompers, George Meany, and Cesar Chavez, are subjects of biographies available for classroom use.

What Are Likely Positive Outcomes of Including Labor Studies in the Curriculum? Incorporation of labor studies in the curriculum can lead to three positive outcomes.

First, students are likely to achieve greater understanding of the contributions of the working men and women who built the United States of America. These contributions are seldom noted with the pride deserved. Usually the focus of history is on "great men/great events." Most of us will not reach the "great men great events" status, so highlighting contributions of working people personalizes labor history.

Second, students are likely to develop an appreciation of the struggles endured by the workers in securing their rights. A study of labor conditions through the years, contrasted with the present situation, should promote this appreciation.

Third, students are likely to acquire more knowledge of workers' rights in the labor market and the sources of those rights. This knowledge of the past can be used to interpret current and future events involving workers and their organizations.

Where Can Teachers Obtain High-quality Resources on Labor Studies? Aside from sources already noted, there are many other resources on labor studies. Many labor unions offer free or inexpensive materials upon request. Although most materials focus on a specific union, several have comprehensive materials that provide a short history of organized labor. Many unions also have speakers' bureaus, a classroom resource to explain what labor unions do; contact a local union for more information. Good histories and biographies are also available. Additional resources on labor studies are described below.

The International Brotherhood of Teamsters (25 Louisiana Avenue, N.W., Washington, DC 20001) provides information on incorporating labor studies into the curriculum and also offers various labor-related materials.

The AFL-CIO, Department of Education (815 16th St., N.W., Washington, DC 20006) provides free and inexpensive materials. Write for details.

The American Federation of Teachers AFL-CIO (555 New Jersey, N.W., Washington, DC 20001) has a poster series, "Working in America: A Short History of the U.S. Labor Movement." (The price is approximately $5). Other resource materials are also available.

Other unions and organizations can provide additional supplementary materials. The organizations mentioned in this ERIC Digest are only a few of the many sources of educational materials on labor studies available to teachers.

References and ERIC Resources

The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are in the ERIC system and are available in microfiche and paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 3900 Wheeler Avenue, Alexandria, Virginia 22304; telephone numbers are 703-823-0500 and 800-227-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number are annotated monthly in CIJE (CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION), which is available in most libraries. EJ documents are not available through EDRS; however, they can be located in the journal section of most libraries by using the bibliographic information provided below.

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